

**Remarks by Professor Arnoud De Meyer,  
SMU President**

**at the Academic Year Opening Ceremony**

**School of Law Building**

**Friday, 18 August 2017**

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Guest of Honour Mr Kuok Khoon Ean, Chairman of Kuok (Singapore) Limited;

Mr Lim Chee Onn, Pro-Chancellor of SMU;

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of the SMU Board of Trustees;

Members of the Board of Trustees;

Faculty, staff and students of SMU;

A good afternoon and a very warm welcome to the start of the 2017/18  
Academic Year.

**Welcome**

This year we have adjusted the ceremony at the opening of the new academic year. We combine the Convocation of our freshmen, the return of our senior and graduate students, the arrival of our international exchange students and the festivities that accompany the presentation of all the student clubs by the senior students to the incoming students.

To the representatives of our freshmen and women I want to extend a very warm welcome and congratulations! You have been accepted by SMU, you accepted our offer and well, you made it! I know that you already know the campus quite well, having gone through the freshmen orientation camps on our renovated Campus Green. I hope you enjoyed these camps in July and August, the school academic briefings, the many student performances on the campus this afternoon and Vivace, the market for the student clubs.

I am also pleased to see the senior students back on campus. I am sure you had a great time with holidays, summer courses, camps, internships, community service, etc., but I hope you are happy to be back at SMU with fresh energy and enthusiasm.

Finally, I also welcome back many of our faculty who had a busy time over the summer with conferences and other research activities and who, from Monday onwards, are in the thick of teaching again.

### **It is a changing world**

The opening of the academic year is a moment to reflect on where the University is heading. You freshmen and women, the future Class of 2021, enter university at an interesting time. Like many other professional organisations, be it businesses, NGOs or governments, universities worldwide see many changes on the horizon.

I do not like the overused concept of disruption, but we do know that change is happening fast. You just have to think about our vocabulary. In the beginning of this century to most people a “mobile” was a piece of art dangling from the ceiling, a “tablet” was a medicine, “clouds” were up in the sky, and if you talked about your “laptop” 30 years ago you would have got some suspicious looks.

Universities were well-established institutions, often hundreds of years old, almost exclusively in one place, catering to people between 18 and 28 years old, disciplinary if not siloed in nature, and detached if not isolated from their environment.

Such universities are not sustainable anymore and I can guarantee you that SMU is already a very, very different place.

But what do we need to do well to remain in tune with the times? In the next 15 minutes, I would like to give you (1) my somewhat skewed view on what a university education is; (2) what the drivers in the environment are that force education to change; (3) what this implies for universities; and (4) what we here at SMU do to respond to these drivers.

### **What is a university education?**

It may be slightly simplistic but, for me, education is a set of rituals and processes to produce adults that meet the society's needs. In a narrow sense, that would mean that we imbue you with the skills that you need to operate in the professional organisations that you will join after graduation. But as a University we are not merely a College that teaches skills. We are a University and we should not forget that the word comes from Universitas Magistrorum et Scholarum, or the Community of Masters/Teachers and Student/Scholars. As Cardinal Newman, who was one of the great thinkers of the nineteenth century about what a university is, implied: it is the community of young men interacting with each other, that prepares them to contribute to society through their creative ideas and decisive and effective actions (*my paraphrasing*). This model of a university has been a very successful model. It has led to the research-

intensive university as we know it, where teaching goes hand in hand with research and has the role of diffusing the newest ideas among the future generation of leaders and change agents.

### **The drivers for change**

Why do we need to adapt such a successful model? Why change the winning horse? I see four reasons for change:

- a. The influence of technology and digital technology in particular: we have moved from a society where information was scarce to one where it is almost free and abundant (at least for you, our SMU students and faculty). One statistic will illustrate this: from 2012 when we decided to make SMU's Library a digital one we have kept the printed books to about 60,000, but we grew the portfolio of e-books from slightly more than 70,000 to close to 400,000 this year. The access to rich databases has kept up with this trend. What does it imply for us that you have all this information at your fingertips? Our faculty do experience almost every day that the way we teach has to change very rapidly. And what does the availability of all this data and information imply for us as researchers? These are questions we only just started to provide answers to.
- b. At the same time, we moved from a world with a supposed abundance of natural resources to one where the effects of global warming threaten us, and where sustainability has become a key concept. – Sustainability was one of the major themes at this year's National Day Parade.-- What will be your responsibility as a student and a graduate in such a world? How do you take personal responsibility for a more sustainable earth? Or to paraphrase the

recently elected French President Emmanuel Macron: “what will be your contribution to make this planet great again?”

- c. Thirdly, we all know that the economic point of gravity is moving to this side of the world. That has significant and positive implications for your wealth and wellbeing. It also will make this part of the world, with its hundreds of millions of middle-class consumers, the source of the major innovations. We see that actually already happening. Therefore, the demand for creative professionals will be growing exponentially. Are you going to be those entrepreneurial professionals who can develop products and services? Above all, will the SMU alumni be the entrepreneurs that can develop the profitable business models that we need for these innovations.
- d. Fourthly, we still live in a globalising world. It may be a globalisation that will be different from the globalisation that was based on international trade and that we saw over the last 25 years. It may well be globalisation of investment, globalisation of human movements, globalisation of cultural and political influences, populated with new global players and institutions like the AIIB, OBOR, etc. I hope that you can be the drivers of all these forms of globalisation.

Given these four changes (and I know that there are more that I cannot address in this speech), what will society expect from a graduate? What kind of adults will fit the need of this new society?

I do not belong to those that believe that basic disciplinary knowledge will not be necessary anymore, because robots and AI are supposed take over from us. You still will have to master the fundamentals of business, accountancy, IT, economics, psychology, sociology, political sciences or law. And SMU will create

the learning environment in which you can acquire these skills. But I see four additional clusters of graduate proficiency<sup>1</sup>:

- a. *Critical thinking and creativity*, which is of course important for our research, but also to create an environment in which you learn to think, challenge and develop your intrapreneurial or entrepreneurial capabilities. – By the way your potential for critical thinking was one of the criteria that we tested in the interviews and discussions that you have gone through in order to be admitted to SMU
- b. *Resilience* or your ability to be nimble, to adapt, to adopt change and the ability to really learn from mistakes and persevere
- c. *The ability to work across teams and experiences* and thus be able to handle diversity in all its forms and develop cross-cultural understanding and humility
- d. *Design thinking* which for me is about positioning people at the centre of decision-making and thus emphasizes ethical leadership and a need for aesthetics

If these proficiencies are the ones you will need in the coming years, what does this mean for us at SMU?

### **What does this mean for what a university should be?**

We have a great opportunity here in East Asia. Indeed, I am convinced that the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will largely be shaped through a partnership of faculty and students from East Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Arvanitakis J. And D.J. Hornsby, 2016, Are universities redundant?, in Arvanitakis J et al, universities , the Citizen Scholar and the Future of Higher Education, Springer

Let me propose seven potential new trends that will help shape that 21<sup>st</sup>-century university and of course what we here at SMU do about it:

- a. *Data is going to change drastically our world and the institution of the University.* The 21<sup>st</sup>-century university will have a larger portfolio of research paradigms, and the inductive exploitation of large databases will become more prominent. Already today, artificial intelligence and machine learning is often more about pattern recognition, based on large databases, than the implementation of sophisticated algorithms. At SMU, we have recognised this and embarked on large-scale research programmes on Living Analytics and its applications. We have also brought analytics as courses to most of the schools and in some cases, we have made it a track or a second major. We want you to learn how to use data and how to interface and to think “together with machines”. And I hope that our faculty will be at the forefront of exploiting the potential of data.
- b. *Technology will play a much bigger role in learning.* Universities as a physical infrastructure may become obsolete and professors may have to transform their roles, but learning will always survive. I personally doubt that in 25 years intelligent and caring robots will fully replace professors and teaching assistants. However, the learning environment will look very different: it will be far less a constrained physical place with traditional lecture theatres and seminar rooms. One will learn anywhere anytime. Technology will help shape the new learning environment. That has for us two types of implications. SMU will need to provide you with a continuously improving learning support system. And as we did in “Lyf@SMU”, the new spaces in the Concourse and the library, we have converted existing physical spaces for other purposes e.g. project work,

discussion areas, meeting places, etc. in order to stimulate your interaction and collaboration. SMU wants to be the place where you hang out all the time. In the new building that will replace the facilities we currently have in SMU Labs, we will apply all the lessons we learned from these investments. I hope we can start building this academic year and the incoming class will no doubt be able to use that eco-friendly building by the start of 2020.

- c. *Learning will not be limited to a short period at the start of your career.* It will continue over your life of careers. Therefore, it is important that you learn how to learn from projects and experiences. I am convinced that this is about the best we can teach you: learn how to learn. I am also convinced that this can be best achieved through experiential learning, by solving unsolved problems and challenges. Therefore we embarked three years ago on a very ambitious project named SMU-X. This is about true experiential learning, where you develop your skills and knowledge through solving real, often unsolved problems. We already offer close to 30 courses, work with more than 250 partners and organise more than 500 projects. I count on all of you to take at least one of these courses throughout your curriculum. And with the creation of multiple postgraduate programmes, executive development and the SMU Academy in April of this year, we also cater to the learning needs of adults. I expect significant growth for these activities at SMU during the coming years
- d. *The new university will be multidisciplinary.* Big problems do not have narrow disciplinary solutions. I observe that our current students do not have too much of an issue with this. But I also notice that the recruitment groups in companies still feel uncomfortable with it. I am absolutely



convinced that this will change very quickly. The two most recent programmes that we launched (Politics, Law and Economics last year and this year the Smart City-Management and Technology) are resolutely going for this multi-disciplinary approach and are examples of what is to come. Also for those of you, who have chosen a more disciplinary approach, the flexibility of our programmes with its multiple combinations of tracks and majors, as well as overseas exchange programmes is such that you can construct your own multi-disciplinary approach.

- e. *The 21<sup>st</sup>-century university will be more flexible in its organisation.* Now we have this neat organisation of four years and two terms or semesters, where the university more or less imposes what you have to do, when and in which sequence. This is an almost universal model. The new university will put much more responsibility on the student who should manage his or her own progression in learning. You may well choose to interrupt your studies, go and work for a while, experience new countries through overseas exchanges, come back for a few additional courses. We may well share the learning experience with some of the companies with whom we partner for internships. SMU already offers that flexibility for almost all of its programmes. A well-organised student can have a rich portfolio of experiences and learning moments through the right combination of local and international internships, overseas exchanges, study missions, interesting community service projects, second majors, summer courses and more. Of course, you and we need to monitor what you have learned. Therefore learning analytics will become a much more important tool for you to manage your own development.
- f. University graduates from the 21<sup>st</sup>-century university will need to take responsibility for the development of a sustainable society. As future

leaders and change agents you will have to hone your skills in doing so. You cannot leave it to governments or NGOs. We all have a responsibility to make this a great planet. That is why we value strongly SMU LifeLessons – a co-curricular learning framework that was launched in 2013, to nurture our students to become self-directed learners, trusted leaders, and responsible global citizens. Freshmen and women were first exposed to SMU LifeLessons during the freshmen orientation, and you will be strongly encouraged to engage progressively in activities and projects that align your academic interests, professional aspirations, values, and life's purpose. LifeLessons is translated in the SMU Pathfinders Programme, a platform for you, students, to make sense of what you will learn from their various co-curricular experience, first about yourself, then about you in teams and groups and finally as a member of society. At later stages, and this is a call to the senior students present here today, I hope you will become the mentors of your juniors. This ambition will be strongly enhanced by the support that Mr Ean Kuok has provided us and I want to join my thanks to those of our chairman. I am convinced that SMU and our graduates will be better for it.

- g. I also believe that the homo sapiens will become more of a homo ludens, and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century university should also become a sort of playground, where you can experiment, simulate and try out new things. John Seeley Brown, one of SMU's honorary doctors, has argued that "the ability to play may well be the most important skill to develop for the 21st century". He defines play as "the tension between the rules of the game and the freedom to act within those rules". Playing games is being inventive and exploring the options within the rules of the game. Playing is often imagining that which does not yet exist, bringing the new into being. That

is what society wants you to do as change agents. Therefore, we may well evolve towards a more “ludic” university<sup>2</sup>! Go to “lyf@SMU” and see what I mean.

A technology savvy, multidisciplinary playground where you become a partner in organising your own flexible learning path, where you learn in a physical and virtual community, where you enhance your skills to interact with AI and Machines, and where research embraces also the inductive methods, isn't that a great place to come and study? That is what we are building at SMU through our Vision for 2025. Freshmen and senior students, I am happy that you joined us to further shape together with the faculty and staff this exciting 21<sup>st</sup>-century university.

To everyone else, welcome once again to another exciting academic year.

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<sup>2</sup> Staley D., 2015, The Future of the university: Speculative Design for Innovation in Higher Education, Educause Review, retrieved on July 19 2017 from: <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2015/11/the-future-of-the-university-speculative-design-for-innovation-in-higher-education>